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DIFFERENTIATED INTEGRATION - FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE. DETERMINERS IN THE INTEGRATION PROCESS OF THE WESTERN BALKANS: ETHNICITY¹

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Abstract: *Most studies of differentiated integration are limited to the European Union, to the relations between the existing Member-States, and to the various institutional arrangements. The relationship between the European Union and the Western Balkans offers the support for testing the concept of differentiated integration on the dynamics recorded between the EU and a group of foreign states. Different Balkan states signed different contractual agreements with the European Union, with the expressed wish to consolidate their European perspective. The EU has a large range of initiatives, already implemented or in the process of implementation, for the Western Balkans. One such key initiative is the regional approach, which pushes the Western Balkan states toward forms of regional cooperation that need to be achieved if progress is sought in their contractual relations with the EU. This approach of the EU is salutary in theory, but in practice, the region of the Western Balkans is not uniform, it does not have any constants in the regional characteristics, in terms of identity, culture, and political and economic development. The Western Balkans space is synonymous with the geopolitics of violence, where drawing and redrawing borders and frontiers hide scars rooted in ethnicity, confession, religion and/or nationality, which are often translated into nationalism and desire for independence.*

Our work will attempt to tap into likely determiners in the integration process of the Western Balkans and to see if it is possible to establish an integrationist model open to dialogue. One of the starting premises is that ethnicity has been a determiner in the integration process (or the disintegration process, for that matter!), both in the case of Yugoslavia, and in the case of post-Yugoslavia evolution, including the process of European integration. Ethnic barriers have been passed by some countries with great difficulty, and the prospect of European integration does not entail a solution to all disagreements. Moreover, some states/nations are at an early stage of identity construction process, often involving claims or amendments to/from other countries.

Keywords: EU, Western Balkans, (differentiated) integration, ethnicity, cooperation, region, enlargement

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Although the political and scientific relevance of this topic is perceived as increasingly larger, the overall research on this topic is characterized by little and disparate data, with a poor theoretical framework that is relatively unfocused on the explanatory analysis. Think tanks started running international projects, often within European Centres of Excellence (Jean Monnet, Altiero Spinelli) in order to try to establish theoretical frameworks and models for the analysis of recurring situations and trends of differentiation depending on the country and the specific policies pursued by that country.

In trying to develop a theory for this phenomenon, the approach is inductive. It means that the existing models have not followed theoretical models, but tried to provide quick solutions to problems raised by certain states.

Most studies of differentiated integration are limited to the European Union, to the relations between the Member States and to various institutional arrangements. The relation between the EU and the Balkans provides scholars with a new insight on the differentiated integration applied on various binds that are forged between the EU and non-EU states (in the case of the Balkans we can address the states as a group). Different states at different moments have entered contractual agreements with the Union in order to consolidate their European perspective. (Leuffen; Rittberger; Schimmelfennig, 2013: 2-6).

The states of the Western Balkans are on different trajectories in what concerns their EU accession. The Union has a large range of initiatives running for the Western Balkans. One key initiative is the regional approach through which the EU pushes the states of the Western Balkans towards forms of regional cooperation that must be attained as a condition to move forward with the contractual agreements with the EU. Thus the region of the Western Balkans is not one to share regional characteristics, either in terms of identity, culture, or political and economic development. (Leuffen; Rittberger; Schimmelfennig, 2013: 26-28) Albania is different from Croatia, which is different from the Former Yugoslav Republic Macedonia. What connects the dots between these states are geographical proximity, a common and agitated history, a political and economic development in a post-communist society, and most importantly, the EU policy to bring and maintain together. From the territory point of view, the EU defines the Western Balkans partially from location and proximity reasons, but mostly from a shared recent violent past. Various policies could be designed based on the economy of these countries, but the regionalism promoted by the EU is based on pushing the hostile states towards cross-border cooperation while their accession to the EU is postponed until local problems are somehow mitigated.

Europe is a multi-identity space. Identity cleavages are present everywhere: Catholic Europe-Orthodox Europe; Western Europe-Eastern Europe; Christian Europe-Muslim Europe; Europe – the EU; Europe – the Non-EU (Brie, Polgar, Chirodea, 2012: 9-11; Brie, 2011) In this European area, the Balkans is not lost among the other states, but remains rather offstandish. Europe did not know and does not know how to manage the Balkans; it has been easier for Europe to regard the Balkans as the Other. The multiple identities are found in the approach of the European policies. Rethinking a theoretical model focused on the Balkans is therefore necessary. There is great need of refining policies and of improving the knowledge about the space. Improving knowledge means an improvement of the entire situation, and this means better integration

1. What is differentiated integration?

“Integration and globalization are two objective processes of the present world development and as such the fate of each nation is closely related to the fate of others, which provides a mutual opportunity to advance and to adapt to the requirements of economic and

social progress. The beginning of the new century and the new millennium is, from this point of view, very promising and brings forth in Europe, one of the greatest opportunities, that of unification ... The basis of this European identity, added and not conflictually opposed to national identities, are our common values: democracy, rights and freedoms, equality, social justice, rule of law, peaceful resolution of conflicts, faith in progress, humanism, pluralism, protection of minorities, unity in diversity”. (Ion Iliescu, *Integrare și globalizare. Viziunea românească*, Presa Națională Publishing House, Bucharest, 2003, p. 5, 7)

Economic and social progress is closely related to the coexistence in time and space of the actual world of nations. In a post-war era in which we talk of globalization and mondialization, integration has become part of usual terminology. Economic integration is a complex process; it is based on the development of relations of cooperation and collaboration of an organized and systematic nature, between several countries seeking to achieve larger economic areas of action or “larger assemblies” that allow the full and more efficient use of production capabilities, as well as the more active promotion of the common interests of the partners in the global market. In this way, between the participating countries will take shape not only relations of cooperation, but also systematic and stable economic interdependence. (Crețoiu, 2007: 270)

In a general form, **economic integration** can be defined as the process of interaction and development of economic interdependence between states through various forms and methods which, on the one hand, ensure the continuity and the deepening of mutual exchanges and, on the other hand, increase the degree of interpenetration of national economies in a body diverse in presentation, but unified and homogeneous in its functionality. (Crețoiu, 2007: 582-583)

In terms of the nature and contents of relations between countries, economic integration leads to the following categories:

- *preferential* relations between the member states within a group or an organization, but also *protectionist* treatment towards third party countries;
- relations of cooperation between member states and competition or competitive relations between some integrationist organizations;
- specific relations of cooperation or tension between regional and global organizations.

So, we have reached a first level of differentiation: preferential treatment in terms of economic integration.

As we have mentioned above, the theoretical framework of differentiated integration is scarce and lately researchers and politicians have felt the need for a norm to explain or to regulate certain phenomena within the EU. The inductive approach of members of academia and think tankers have come up with explanations and possible definitions for an European reality. Thus, **preferential integration**, or **flexible integration**, or **differentiated integration** refers to the territorially fragmented validity of the EU norms, be it economic policies or social policies. *The integration is differentiated if: the individual EU norms are not applied to some member states; the individual EU norms are applied to some non-member states; or both.* The specialists in European Studies, together with politicians or members of international organizations believe that the territorial and functional enlargement of the EU resulted in an increase of the need for differentiated integration.²

² <http://www.eup.ethz.ch/research/diffintegration>, viewed at 29.08.2013

The result? Various solutions were designed for various member states, with different priorities and different capacities, to move on the path of progress towards a deeper integration, at various speeds.³

A first agreement: any group of member states entering a deeper cooperation should remain open to accept other member states that are willing and capable to join the initial core. Joschka Fischer and Jacques Delors were firm in denying any intention to erect walls within the enlarged EU. A second agreement: all leaders agree that any initiative on the part of member states should not affect the *acquis communautaire*. Joschka Fischer insisted on this issue asking to create coordinating mechanisms between these countries, in order to stimulate a better integration. Romano Prodi made clear that the uniformity of the legal framework and the coherence of the *acquis communautaire* must be preserved.⁴

In 2002, Michel Barnier and Antonio Vitorino asked the fundamental question, as a corollary of a long going debate: “What is that we want to do together?”. The answer will dictate whether a common political project can provide the basis for further integration, or if different projects can coexist. Michel Barnier went further, arguing that the question should not be addressed only in terms of economic policy or security policy, but there is need to expand the debate to the future of the internal market, regional policy and competition.⁵

1.1. Differentiated integration: *Pros*

Differentiated integration, in one form or another, has long been practiced. Like any concept put in practice, it can present both advantages and disadvantages. Differentiated integration does not prevent progress, but rather unifies the integration results in relation to the whole (i.e. the entirety of the member states). Differentiated integration is a consequence of the diversity and plurality of the member states and provides not only a legal framework for countries that want to submit their application, but also ways of expressing individual will, by separating from the whole (see the case of the *opt-out*). In general, differentiated integration is addressed to the states that are not integrated (see the cases of Macedonia, and Serbia), or states that are excluded (see the case of the UK before it was accepted to join).

If differentiated integration provides different ways and different speeds for membership and/or living in the Union then it also offers a reversed potential for separation from the Union, at one level or more (see the discussion regarding Greece and Spain, the euro zone, etc.).

1.2. Differentiated integration: *Cons*

A first reaction to the differentiated integration policies enforced in states that have not yet received permanent membership status is that the progress within the EU (especially regarding EU enlargement) is hindered by a number of uneven policies. If we regard this issue through the lens of local realities seen by comparison with European realities, it can be argued that differentiated integration policies were issued and applied

³ *Differentiated Integration in An Enlarged Union*, published in March 27, 2002, revised in January 29, 2010 available at: <http://www.euractiv.com/future-eu/differentiated-integration-enlarged-union/article-117073>, viewed at 29.06.2013

⁴ Ibidem

⁵ *Contribution de Michel Barnier et António Vitorino à la Convention européenne sur „La méthode communautaire” (3 septembre 2002)*, available online at: <http://www.cvce.eu/collections/unit-content/-/unit/d5906df5-4f83-4603-85f7-0cab24b9fe1/356d1e8d-3396-4cf0-9031-e6939faf75f1/Resources#6605c830-7a2d-451e-a4de-3f27d49d19e8>, last viewed on 25.09.2013

precisely in response to these local realities (see the case of Romania and Bulgaria - corruption, or Serbia - human rights).

Another argument against differentiated integration is the uneven enforcement of European rules only in some of the states, and addressed only to some European citizens (see the Schengen area, or the cooperation in security and intelligence exchange between states).

The most serious objection relates to obtaining benefits from differentiated integration without assuming the costs of participation in such integration (see the differentiated monetary policy or the safety and defence case, especially in the context of EU-NATO relations).

2. Differentiated integration in the space of former Yugoslavia. Determiners in the integration process: ethnicity

Most studies of differentiated integration are limited to the European Union, to the relations between the existing Member-States, and to the various institutional arrangements. The relationship between the European Union and the Western Balkans offers the support for testing the concept of differentiated integration on the dynamics recorded between the EU and a group of foreign states. Different Balkan states signed different contractual agreements with the European Union, with the expressed wish to consolidate their "European perspective". (Dyson, Sepos, 2010: 5-8). The EU has a large range of initiatives, already implemented or in the process of implementation, for the Western Balkans. One such key initiative is the regional approach, which pushes the Western Balkan states toward forms of regional cooperation that need to be achieved if progress is sought in their contractual relations with the EU. This approach of the EU is salutary in theory, but in practice, the region of the Western Balkans is not uniform, it does not have any constants in the regional characteristics, in terms of identity, culture, and political and economic development.

The Western Balkans space is synonymous with the geopolitics of violence, where drawing and redrawing borders and frontiers hide scars rooted in ethnicity, confession, religion and/or nationality, which are often translated into nationalism and desire for independence. Such a region cannot be treated as a whole. The dissolution of Yugoslavia brought Europe to face a new problem: the new state borders are not the same with the frontiers between the nations. Although the Christian denominations (particularly the Orthodox confession, but also Catholicism in Slovenia and Croatia) are the majority here, the Muslim communities in the Western Balkans are not an artificial creation; they are the result of a long history (the migration of Muslim population from Asia and the conversion of local population to Islam). (Gossiaux, 2002: 37-39). These differences in religion and ethnicity have led to political disagreements, the relations between states being managed unequally by them (see the cases of Croatia-Serbia, Serbia-Kosovo-Albania or Macedonia-Greece), not to mention that Europe's reactions to the Balkan movements are divided (see the recognition of the independence of Kosovo).

We do not know whether the differentiated integration is relevant to the EU-Balkans relations, but we have to tap into some of the relevant aspects for our research. Firstly, the differentiated integration resulted from the political interests and preferences of the EU member states. These Balkans states, if given the option and if they chose to immediately become full members of the EU, would not adopt willingly the policies of differentiated integration. If a part of the definition for the differentiated integration reads "*the process through which European states... opt to act at different speeds*" (Dyson, Sepos, 2010: 4), in the case of the Balkans it would have to be turned into "*the process*

through which European states ... opt for other non-EU states to act at different speeds for European integration". Europe's implication in the Balkans has been ever since 1991 of such a nature that it can be argued that the EU has been imposing a differentiated integration in the Balkan region. (Economides, 2008: 1, 2).

Secondly, if we apply the enlargement lens again, the differentiated integration has a very strong political hue to it. In other words, the EU's decisions referring to the Balkans show a direct manifestation of political strategies to manage the so-called Balkan problem – ethnic rivalries, irredentism, separatism, war, corruption, democratization, institutional consolidation.

In view of the complex features of the Balkans, it is questionable why Europe has been intent on treating the Balkans as a whole region. There is historical reason that adds to the psychological reason to prove that the nations and ethnicities living within the geographical space of the Balkans do not share the same traits. We only have to look at the Yugoslav wars, or the disintegration of Yugoslavia that only made more visible that the unification that gave the former Republic of Yugoslavia was a political one and it was not shared by the inhabitants of the newly created state.

The EU policy towards the Balkans falls under two essential queries referring to space/territory. *What is the territory that we call "the Balkans"?* (what and where are the Balkans)? and *Where does the EU want to set its territorial limits?* (Economides, 2008: 4)

The answers are important because of at least two reasons: the EU formulates the policies for the Balkan states as a region, and at the same time, the EU differentiates between the Balkan states in terms of candidature or their accession to the EU. Secondly, the Balkan states have imprinted differently on the member states, and the politicians have different reactions towards them, hence the debates related to the EU enlargement and its territorial limits. If the EU's stated intention to create a regional interconnected series of Balkan states regions (connected both at interstate level and transnational level) in order to transcend ethnical and national cleavages for the purpose of bringing them closer to European integration, then such intention is undermined by the European hostility towards the enlargement, precisely because such enlargement to contain the Balkans is partially based on matters of identity and religion.

In terms of identity and territory, the Balkans have proven to be an easy target for the European critique. From the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand to Yugoslavia's violent collapse, the modern history of the Balkans is easily condemnable. The expression "Balkans, the powder keg of Europe" is copied, enhanced and almost always used to describe the politics developed in the region. The long term western perception of the Western Balkans is beyond that of a region with problems, but by judging after European marks, the perception is that of a foreign region, an alien region located at the very heart of Europe. The Other, geographically in Europe, but in attitudes and actions with no roots in Europe. Some dispute this image, arguing that whatever image created in the mind of the Western Europe is that of some "imaginary Balkans". An inextricably geographical region of Europe, but culturally constructed as Alterity, the Balkans have often served as a repository of negative characteristics on which a positive image of the "European" was built. (Todorova, 1997)

What is real is the fact the Balkans and its inhabitants still raise negative reactions, and the event of 1990 onwards have "helped" to consolidate their negative image. All these had a tremendous influence on the modern understanding of the Balkans and consequently, on the impact on the EU's policies towards the region. When the Federative Republic of Yugoslavia was amid a bloody conflict, of ethnical purging and genocide, Europa was transforming as well: in the east – the fall of communism; in the west – the European project

(Treaty of Maastricht and the creation of the European Union). In other words, a true redesign of the continent. This has been more than a spatial and territorial redesign; it was one of cultural and ideological change where the Europeanness was gaining ground with its new norms and democratic ideals. It was a time for the nation-state to change face. The European project turned the table around, the nation-state was starting to lose ground. Nationalism raised once more with the fall of communism and with it so was the question of ethnical identity in some states. Not much importance was given to nationalism and ethnic identity as the new wave of democratic reconstruction of a universal European space was the new high.

Against this euphoric backdrop, whatever European conflict that was simmering in the Balkan region neighbouring both Eastern and Western Europe was impossible to grasp. It was easier for Europe to turn a blind eye and to return to Todorova's explanation of the "imaginary Balkans". Robert D. Kaplan comes up with another explanation, a stereotype, finding plausible ground for the Yugoslav wars being rooted in the much older hypotheses referring to a "non-European" part of the continent. (Kaplan, 2005: 79-181)

The "Balkans" became a pejorative term for a continental region amid war. (Dyson, Sepos, 2010: 120-128). Following the conflict in Yugoslavia, the rest of the region was perceived as having the same problems, with the same enmities that fuelled the Yugoslav wars. Again, Europe looked at the Balkans as a region, as a whole. The main reason for confusion was the lack a clear distinction between the geostrategic threats and the consequences of Yugoslavia's break-up, and the socio-cultural problems that are at the core of the conflicts in the area (Glenny, 1993: 92-105). The general view was that the Yugoslav wars and thus the Balkans politics were ones of nationalistic fight, by placing one ethnic group against the other (Economides, 1992: 142-156). And that was seen as an anachronism in a new Europe, on its way to advanced integration.

Susan Woodward, analysing the causes of the Yugoslav wars (Woodward, 1995: 22-31), maintains that the problems of Yugoslavia were not the problems of Europe. Romania and Bulgaria, for instance, were not caught by the same ethnical problems as Yugoslavia. Secondly, she argues that the dissolution of Yugoslavia was not the result of a simple equation incorporating nationalism and ethnical rivalries, but the result of a much more subtle and complex interaction between economic, political and constitutional problems that needed to be evaluated in a larger context, both nationally and internationally.

Incapable to reach some consensus as to what to do with the Balkans and moreover, without any coercion mechanisms, the EU set out an isolation policy. Isolation against war, against refugees and economic migrants. This was the policy applied to the entire region until the second half of the 90s when after the end of the war in Bosnia (December 1995), some states perceived as being Balkan - Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria - entered in contractual agreements with the EU and later on even started their negotiations for accession. Western Europe realized in the whole process that the Union maintained separate relations with separate states and groups of states from the region. Thus a new term appeared, the South-Eastern Europe (SEE) that replaced the term "Balkans" and Romania and Bulgaria received the green light for a different path to join the EU. Romania and Bulgaria applied for EU membership in December 1995, the Luxembourg European Council issued a favourable response in December 1997, and the negotiations for full membership began in early 2000.

Romania and Bulgaria's accession to the European Union is an example for decision-making and policies of differentiated integration. The big gap of time between the issuance of a favourable opinion and the beginning of negotiations was because while

politically and strategically the EU wanted to encourage Romania and Bulgaria, in reality, these countries could not fulfil the criteria for membership in the short term.

Slovenia followed a different path once it emerged free from the Yugoslav Federation: Slovenian approaches to the EU were viewed much more favourably, due to Slovenia's ability to meet the accession criteria and the *acquis*, but also because of the strong support within the EU (France, UK, Germany, despite strong objections from Italy), and the general belief that Slovenia is a central European state and not a Balkan one.

With three countries on different paths, echoes were not late to appear. There are several implications of the differentiated integration within the regional context: on the one hand, the Balkans are treated differently from other European regions undergoing enlargement, and on the other hand, notwithstanding the great inclination that the EU has for regionalism, the Union does differentiate between certain parts of the Balkans in terms of integration.

Then in turn there is the feedback from the Balkans: their eye is critical, they look upon the enlargement with what is called euroscepticism. The regional approach from the EU does not sit well with the different dates of accession and with the various requests in order to receive official candidate status. Let us see how far from the mark we are with this statement. In 2004, Slovenia joins the EU. Croatia just became a member this summer (July 1, 2013). Serbia received full candidate status on March 1, 2012. The accession negotiations with Montenegro started on 29 June 2012.

With Albania the situation is rather delicate: in October 2012 the European Commission evaluated the progress of Albania to comply with several key priorities, being conditional to achieve official candidate status and start accession negotiations. Out of twelve, four key priorities were found to be met, while two were well in progress and the remaining six were in moderate progress. The report concluded that if Albania manages to hold a fair and democratic parliamentary election in March 2013, and implements the remaining changes also to comply with the eight key priorities still not fully met, then the Council of the European Union would be recommended to grant Albania official candidate status.⁶

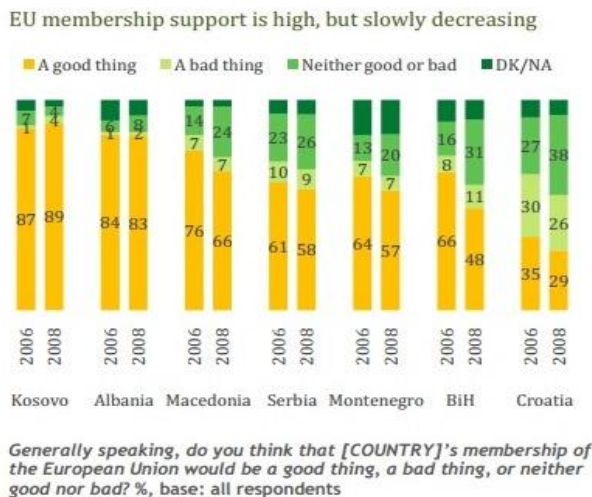
Macedonia has been a candidate for accession to the EU since 2005 since it submitted its membership application in 2004, thirteen years after its independence from former Yugoslavia. As of 2012, it is one of five remaining candidate countries, together with Iceland, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey, after the latest round of enlargement that brought membership to Bulgaria and Romania. Among current obstacles to full membership is the on-going dispute with Greece over the country's name, which is also the reason why it is officially addressed by the European Union with the provisional appellation "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", rather than its constitutional name, "Republic of Macedonia". Another problem are the strained relations between Macedonia and Bulgaria due to the ethnic groups and their allegiance to either country (the Macedonian Question). Overall, the Western Balkan region is not heterogeneous in terms of their views of Europe: *Gallup Balkan Monitor*⁷ describes a complex image that incorporates a wide range of perceptions pertaining to the European Union. The opinions recorded in poles vary from the euphoria of the EU (in Kosovo and Albania) to a beginning of an alienation feeling (in Croatia and Bosnia Herzegovina).

⁶ European Commission, "Key findings of the 2012 Progress Report on Albania", retrieved 11 October 2012

⁷ *Gallup Balkan Monitor*, GBM in short

The GBM results from Macedonia and Bosnia reflect also opposing opinions of ethnic groups living in these two countries. When asked if they trusted the EU institutions, only 7% of the Croats answered that they had high trust, while only 35% admitted that they “kind of” trusted the EU, reported *Gallup Balkan Monitor*, in 2010⁸.

Graph. 1: Poles results showing the support of Balkan countries for EU accession



Source: *Gallup Balkan Monitor*⁹

These situations render difficult the creation of a comprehensive policy.¹⁰ Because the Balkans have presented a series of challenges (geostrategic, political and economic, and socio-cultural), the EU has struggled to formulate and to implement a range of policies to accommodate all. But when we deal with different territories (and types of territories) it has proven to be quite difficult to integrate all these countries as a region.

But how far do the Europeans want to draw the borders of Europe? Where and when they want to stop expansion? (Brie, Polgar, Chirodea, 2012: 12-15). The Western Balkan countries have been but a spectator to the accession of countries in South East Europe. The insistence of the Union in terms of regional cooperation mostly related to the region ethnical issues would be indications that their accession prospects are dark. Why were they just treated differently and why not were they not offered an early entry into the EU as a way to accelerate the reform and to introduce EU membership as a mechanism for conflict resolution? Is it possible that the insistence on regional cooperation combined with the current European crisis and the general recession is a means to accelerate the transition to the EU or is it just a way to build a form of regional integration which will act as a substitute for enlargement (with preferential sectoral agreements with the EU)? (Polgar, 2011: 46-48)

These questions have myriad ramifications. The European future of the Western Balkans is subject to a larger European debate referring to merits seen through a European lens. Serbia's European future was not hampered by the inability to satisfy the technical

⁸*Gallup Balkan Monitor, Insights and Perceptions: Voices of the Balkans*, “The Gallup Balkan Monitor: the Western Balkans’ most wide-ranging survey ever”, 2010, available at <http://www.balkan-monitor.eu>, viewed on 25.09.2013

⁹*Idem*

¹⁰*Gallup Balkan Monitor, Insights and Perceptions: Voices of the Balkans*, “Perceptions of the EU in the Western Balkans”, 2009, disponibil la http://www.balkan-monitor.eu/files/Gallup_Balkan_Monitor-Focus_On_EU_Perceptions.pdf, viewed on 8.06.2013

aspects of the *acquis*, but because of Serbia's refusal to cooperate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), concerning the arrest of indicted war criminals, a return to the violent collapse of Yugoslavia that has come to characterize the Balkans. (Dyson, Sepos, 2010: 57-81).

There is a current of opinion which suggests that there were too many EU policies towards the Balkans since the mid-1990s (Rupnik, 2011: 17-30; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2011: 154-160), and that the region was too much tried by too many initiatives. Generally speaking, these initiatives aim at the reconstruction, the state building and the institutional consolidation, and finally at the EU accession. The Commission used a variety of tools to implement these initiatives in order to promote the status of EU membership to all states in South East Europe (SEE). These types of initiatives were carried out simultaneously, and while some states like Romania, Bulgaria and Slovenia along the newest entrant Croatia have achieved membership through a traditional route, the other Western Balkan states face the prospect of a variety of policies and agreements before signing the final agreement to start the process of accession. All Western Balkan countries aim to become members of the European Union, an objective endorsed by the European Council in Feira in June 2000 and confirmed by the European Council in Thessaloniki in June 2003. In 2005 the European Council clearly reaffirmed the existing commitments¹¹:

1. Croatia is an acceding country¹².
2. Montenegro, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia who received candidate status remain part of the PSA.
3. Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo * (under UNSCR 1244/99) - potential candidates.

In January 2006 the European Commission adopted a Communication on "The Western Balkans on the road to the EU: consolidating stability and raising prosperity"¹³. The Communication assesses the progress at the summit in Thessaloniki and establishes concrete measures for strengthening the EU policy for the Western Balkans and its instruments.¹⁴

A territorial new group - a European space - was created as a result and it is the recipient of substantial EU policies. In turn, this has created a specific timeline or a differentiation over time in terms of integration, in the case when some countries are moving steadily and faster than others towards (potential) EU accession. (Marks; Scharpf; Schmitter; Streeck, 1996: 136)

Klaus Goetz speaks of the temporal differentiated integration (Goetz, 2010: 67-81), which is different from the variable geometry and *à la carte* approach through the fact that it does not question the common objectives. Thus some states can move faster than others, while the goals remain the same. Here, the common goal is joining the EU: all countries of South-East Europe have declared so. The Thessaloniki Agenda, 2003, certified the Union's intention to accept the accession of all Western Balkan states¹⁵.

¹¹ Report from the Commission, The Stabilisation and Association process for South East Europe, Second Annual Report – Annex 1, Brussels, 26.3.2003, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/enlargement_process/accesion_process/how_does_a_country_join_the_eu/sap/85349_en.pdf, viewed on 12.09.2013

¹² After the report was issued Croatia joined the EU on 1 July 2013

¹³ Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/key_documents/index_en.htm, viewed on 12.06.2013

¹⁴ Official website of the European Commission, Extindere, Procesul de Stabilizare si Asociere, disponibil la : http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/enlargement_process/accesion_process/how_does_a_country_join_the_eu/sap/sap_composite_paper_annex1_en.pdf, viewed on 29.06.2013

¹⁵ Thessaloniki Agenda, available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32004R0533:RO:HTML>, viewed at 29.06.2013

Conclusions

While some countries have made progress with the process of EU accession following a route set through European Agreements, the commencement of negotiations and finally the accession, the Western Balkan countries are required to negotiate and sign a series of “pre –contracts” before anyone could contemplate applying for full membership. Some see this as “obstructionist tactics”, others see it as “a more permanent obstacle” to EU accession. However, what it does is to increase the spatial concept of differentiated integration and create “a parallel process of temporal differentiated integration”. (Economides, 2008: 28-31). Since the 1990s the region seems to become more narrow and compact as ever. The Balkans have remained a region synonymous with war, many have not been able to see past the ethnic crises in Kosovo and Serbia, and the involvement of other countries and organizations to restore peace have since been on-going. By the end of the Kosovo crisis, the overall Balkan region, also known as South-East Europe, acquires a new political identity in the eyes of Europe: “Western Balkans”.

The famous formula “Western Balkans are the states of former Yugoslavia, minus Slovenia, plus Albania” has become a *leitmotif* among EU officials dealing with South-East Europe (SEE). In reality, the Western Balkans have become just “Balkans” in the eyes of the EU in terms of differentiated integration. The Balkan states are regarded as “problem states”, often regarded as a religious enclave in Europe, and the EU made it clear that they have a long way to go before having a real chance to apply for EU membership status.

How can one advance if there are countries that are able and do wish to go ahead when there are countries that have no wish to do so or are unable to move forward? The flexibility is the functioning principle that would allow the EU to come up with methods of differentiated integration¹⁶, as opposed to the institutional rigidity that would entail the exclusive enforcement of the EU system in all cases and for all countries. (Closa Montero, 2010)

History will tell if such a complex knot of ethnicities and populations with different beliefs and under different conditions will be able to be funnelled through the integration motors of the European Union.

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¹⁶ i.e. Positive or negative integration

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